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ABSTRACT

The New Zealand Council for Educational Research conducted a study to determine students' perceptions of and attitudes toward poetry instruction. A group of 186 fifth form (eleventh grade) students and 56 fifth form English teachers were queried in the following areas: the point of studying poetry; the "really important things" about a poem; the kinds of student poems that are preferred by teachers; and the reasons for memorizing poetry. It was found that students believed that poetry was taught and assigned to be memorized for practical reasons, while teachers advanced such reasons as aesthetic enrichment, intrinsic ideas, and personal satisfaction. Students and teachers were agreed that the aim of poetry instruction was to determine the meaning of poems. Students perceived teachers as valuing technical correctness and self-revelation, while teachers indicated that they were interested in such qualities as originality and imaginative language. Considerable disparity was found to exist between the perceptions of teachers regarding poetry instruction and the beliefs of pupils about such instruction. Classroom recommendations include greater teacher interest in individual students' reactions to poetry, linking the study of poetry with students' writing, and greater teacher sensitivity to students' feelings about their own poetry. (DF)

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Item 16

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Fifth Formers: English Teachers: Poetry:

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by Rachel McAlpine,
1978 J.R. McKenzie Fellow

Why do students think teachers include poetry in the English curriculum? What aspects of poetry do they say teachers stress? Do the opinions of students and teachers on these matters coincide?

During 1978 an attempt was made to answer these questions, as a small part of a larger investigation into the perceptions and feelings of fifth form English teachers and their students about poetry and poets, and into some aspects of the teaching and evaluation of fifth form poetry. Students and teachers from six secondary schools in or around Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch took part in the smaller study, the students (186 fifth formers) being asked to say what they thought their teachers would reply to the following questions:

What is the point of studying poetry?
What are the really important things about a poem?
Student poems —what kinds are preferred?
What are the reasons for learning a poem?

The same questions were also posed to their teachers, but there was no attempt to match the responses of individual teachers with the observations of their own students.

Fifth formers were selected for the study in a quite arbitrary manner: two from the front, two from the middle, and two from the back of each classroom. No more than six students from the class of any one teacher were involved. Their replies were recorded during a group discussion. In general, each student gave one answer to a question, but while some were unable to respond others were more articulate, and gave more than one response. In these cases each response was recorded. Before discussion of a particular question, each student was given a cartoon; the intention was to help them understand the question and assist them to differentiate between their own opinions and their guesses about what their teacher would answer. The question they were to answer was also clarified by a little explanation. In many cases, students replied from experience with an earlier teacher, because they hadn't 'done' any poetry so far in the fifth form.

The fifth form English teachers in these schools were asked to complete a questionnaire covering their attitudes, perceptions and practices in the teaching of poetry. Forty-six of 56 teachers completed the task, which made a substantial demand on their time. Thus the teacher sample may be biased in favour of teachers who don't mind doing tedious chores for an inquisitive outsider; or it may be biased in favour of teachers who enjoy poetry. In any case, when asked about their preferences in teaching certain aspects of English, it was clear that, on the whole, poetry was not highly favoured. Only 20 percent indicated that poetry was their first or second choice, and for nearly 60 percent it was the fourth or fifth choice.

What's the point of studying poetry?

A majority of the students thought that their teachers would give practical answers to this question: to pass School Certificate, because it is part of the syllabus, because it would help improve written expression, because it's useful for other aspects of English, and so on. Most of the teachers, on the other hand, said they taught poetry because of its aesthetic importance, for the personal enrichment of the students, or because of the intrinsic value of the ideas in the poem. Practical reasons were advanced by only about a fifth of the teachers.

How can one account for this apparent difference? Well, it may be that the School Certificate examination looms so large in the imagination of fifth formers that it colours their attitudes to everything. Or it could be that teachers do not take the time to make their purposes sufficiently clear to their students. There is also the possibility that what teachers say they do in the classroom is not a completely accurate guide to what they actually do. In any case, the difference is striking and worthy of further study.

Another interesting difference that emerged concerned the writing of poetry. Only 5 teachers (3 percent of the teacher sample) gave answers that suggested that one purpose of 'teaching' poetry was to help the students write their own poetry. Yet 24 students (drawn from 16 different classes and representing 13 percent of the student sample) saw this as one of the aims of 'studying' poetry. This difference is surprising when one takes into account the slightly different wording of the questions: the teachers were asked why they *taught* poetry, a word which could easily accommodate the practice of teaching students to write, as well as read poems. And the students were asked how their teacher would reply to the question: 'What is the

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point of *studying* poetry?' —phrasing which surely suggested the reading, rather than the writing of poetry. Given this difference in wording, one might have expected the teachers to have stressed writing more than the students did, rather than the reverse. Moreover, the teachers' lack of emphasis on writing seems to be in conflict with their practice, since other data gathered in the course of the study showed that it is by no means uncommon for students to be asked, by their teachers, to write poetry. For example, 24 teachers said they would ask their students to write a poem more than 3 times a year, and 11 of them said they would often give students the choice of doing this.

One explanation for this anomaly is that teachers regard the study or reading of poetry as the main business of the English teacher, and while asking their students to write poetry is something they actually do, they don't perceive it as important. Perhaps they regard it as a pleasant and worthwhile occupation but one that is not central to the business of teaching poetry. Certainly I found few teachers actively attempting to teach students the skills of writing poetry.

One can also speculate that teachers may underestimate the interest of their students in writing poetry. There seem to be a number of students who are neutral or even hostile to the study of poetry, but who nonetheless feel a strong need to write poetry for their own satisfaction. I encountered such students during the course of the study, and it seems possible that students of this type could have their perceptions of their teacher's aims distorted by their own wish to write poetry.

What's important about a poem?

The second question focussed on those aspects of a poem the teacher was likely to stress when studying a poem in class. Teachers laid heavy emphasis on getting the meaning, and the students' responses showed that they perceived this as the main element in the learning situation too. Moreover, both students and teachers interpreted meaning as being the 'hidden', 'true' or 'abstract' meaning, as well as the surface meaning. References to meaning, either surface or 'hidden', accounted for 43 percent of the student responses and 28 percent of the teacher responses.

One curious finding was that 9 students (4 percent of the sample and drawn from 5 schools and 7 different classes) apparently thought that their teacher was interested in studying poetry with them largely in order to improve their own writing of poetry. Yet none of the teachers surveyed gave this as one of their objectives. When this response was met it was questioned, in order to clear up any misunderstanding. But the students insisted that this was certainly their belief. How they came by it is a mystery but, given the size of the group, it may not be a very important mystery.

More importance however, can probably be attached to the finding that teachers say they are more interested in style, including form and the technical aspects of style, than students believe them to be. This seems to tie in with the finding that few teachers actually try to teach the mechanics of writing poetry.

Apart from the exceptions noted, the two sets of responses tended to be virtually identical. For example, teachers say they pay little attention to the poet or the poet's motives, and the perceptions of the students support his opinion. All in all, it appears that students may be better witnesses to what teachers do in the classroom than they are to the teachers' reasons or motives for doing it.

Student poems: what kinds are preferred?

The next question dealt with the writing of poems, as distinct from reading or studying them. In their responses teachers indicated that they placed great store on qualities like originality, freshness, the imaginative use of language, striking images and so on. Students, however, perceived their teachers to be concerned much more with poems on set topics (something none of the teachers mentioned) and poems that were technically correct. However, students believed that teachers will like poems that are personal, sincere or self-revealing, and a number of teachers did give those as the qualities they approved of in student poetry.

During the discussion on this question 26 of the students made comments resentful of their teachers' reactions to their poems: 'teachers shouldn't mark our poems', or 'teachers have no right to criticize our ideas'. It was obvious that many students felt strongly possessive and defensive about their poetry —probably a common feeling among young poets. This emotional involvement, it should be noted, was specific to poetry, for students said they felt differently about teachers' comments, for example, on their essays.

What are the reasons for learning a poem?

Finally, students and teachers were asked about the practice of memorizing poetry. The teacher questionnaire asked: 'Approximately how many times a year do you *insist* that your fifth formers should memorize some poetry?' and 'Approximately how many times a year do you *suggest* that your fifth formers should memorize some poetry?' This is how they replied:

35 percent would never insist and never suggest;
33 percent would never insist, but would sometimes suggest;
4 percent would never suggest, but would sometimes insist;
28 percent would both insist and suggest.

Obviously, the practice of asking students to 'learn a poem off by heart' is by no means dead, although most teachers never insist. They say: 'It is pointless', 'of no value', 'destroys their frail interest'. But between those teachers who never insist and never suggest and those who both insist and suggest is a large group with somewhat ambivalent attitudes. These teachers are willing to suggest it to their pupils, on the grounds that it may bring present satisfaction and future comfort, and they bait the hook by saying it is 'useful for School Certificate'. It should, however, be noted that even teachers who were firmly convinced of the value of memorizing made comments on the dangers of 'turning students off' poetry by rote learning.

What did the students say? Well, to begin with about half of them had to 'imagine' what the teacher might say, never having been asked, as far as they could remember, to memorize a poem at high school. But more than a third of the responses were of a kind that indicated that the students felt that if the teacher did ask them to memorize a poem it was for practical reasons: for examination purposes, to help them with their language skills, or so on. By contrast, only 7 percent of the responses covered reasons like personal satisfaction, pleasure, or a sense of achievement.

Conclusions

There are some obvious differences between what English teachers say they do and what pupils believe they do, and the reasons for this are not clear.

Putting to one side questions concerning the reliability and validity of data of the kind used in this study, it is reassuring that a large proportion of the student responses indicate that students believe that their teachers have as a major goal the personal development of their students —in language, in imagination and in emotion.

It is also perhaps understandable that the student responses should tend to congregate around practical and short-term teacher goals: examinations, syllabus requirements, basic understanding of a poem, and so forth. But teachers should be aware that this emphasis on the practical can have dangers, especially if it is associated with a pre-occupation with getting the 'real', 'deeper' or 'hidden' meaning. When a student who is

mostly concerned with the nuts and bolts of getting School Certificate is asked to look for the 'hidden' meaning, the chances are good that he or she will tend to think more in terms of a single 'right' interpretation than of a variety of co-existent meanings, to see the poem as a riddle with only one answer rather than as a game or a mystery. Certainly, if we combine the practical emphasis and the stress on interpretation with an apparently meagre interest, on the teachers' part, in the individual reactions of the students, we may have one of the keys to the very real distaste for poetry encountered so often in our secondary school students.

Teachers should also take seriously the persistent references by students to the writing of poetry as a perceived goal. This may arise because the students have, at this stage of their development, an unfulfilled need to express themselves in poetry. If students do feel a need of this kind, it is one at odds with the pressures of School Certificate, but it is one the schools can easily help provide for, by linking the study of poetry with the writing of poetry, at least as an option. And perhaps we should go further, and look seriously at our priorities in teaching poetry at this level.

Teachers must also be sensitive in their responses to the poetry written by students, knowing how indignant and hurt they may be by negative criticism. Since students seem to think their teachers are pre-occupied with the technical correctness of the poems they write, or with their subjects, we might do well to play down these aspects. Instead, we should respond with specific praise for the qualities to be valued.

Table 1: *What's the Point of Studying Poetry?*

	Students: If you asked your teacher what would be the reply?		Teachers: If a student asked, what would you say?	
Reasons	N	%	N	%
School Certificate, exams, syllabus requirements, traditions, etc.	47	28.1	24	16.1
Personal enrichment, to enhance emotional and imaginative development, to learn about life, etc.	29	17.3	44	29.5
Useful for English and other subjects, acquiring skills, etc.	29	17.3	4	2.6
Help students write poetry, improve written expression, etc.	28	16.7	5	3.3
Aesthetic appreciation, the poet's use of language, etc.	19	11.3	31	20.8
Teacher enjoyment	13	7.7	11	7.3
Intrinsic value of ideas	–	–	21	14.0
Other reasons	2	1.1	9	6.0
Total responses	167	100	149	100

Table 2: *What are the Really Important Things about a Poem?*

	Students: How would your teacher answer this question?		Teachers: When you study a poem in class, what do you concentrate on?	
Aspects stressed	N	%	N	%
Hidden meaning, theme, the message	62	27.4	24	19.5
Style, use of words, language	39	17.2	24	19.5
Meaning, understanding it, the situation, characters' thoughts	35	15.4	12	9.7
Students' responses, students' interpretations	23	10.1	10	8.1
Technical aspects, prosody, genre, form, figures of speech	21	9.2	31	25.2
Poet's feelings, mood, attitude	14	6.1	6	4.8
Students learn to write poems	9	3.9	–	–
Poet's motive, the poet	6	2.6	2	1.6
Other aspects	17	7.5	14	11.3
Total responses	226	100	123	100

Table 3: *Student Poems: What Kinds are Preferred?*

	Students: What kind of poem does your teacher like best?		Teachers: What qualities do you approve of in your students' poems?	
Qualities	N	%	N	%
Self-revealing, sincere, personal	45	18.6	19	14.9
Fluent expression, varied language, descriptive, metaphors, imaginative use of words	36	14.9	33	25.9
On the topic set by teacher, in tune with teacher's opinions	33	13.6	–	–
One that makes sense, something worth saying, shows thought, effort	33	13.6	10	7.8
Consistent, coherent, precise, plain appropriate form and language	26	10.7	17	13.3
Original, imaginative, interesting	19	7.8	26	20.4
Correctness of form, rhyme, length, spelling	19	7.8	2	1.5
Insight, perception, sensitivity	–	–	12	9.4
Miscellaneous	30	12.4	8	6.2
Total responses	241	100	127	100

Table 4: *What is the Reason for Learning a Poem?*

	Students: Why would a teacher ask you to memorize a poem?		Teachers: Why do you have students memorize a poem?	
Reasons	N	%	N	%
For exams, tests, School Certificate, etc.	54	32.9	12	23.5
Entertainment, performance, oral and social skills	21	12.8	–	–
To help understand the poem	19	11.5	4	7.8
Teacher likes the poem, it's a famous poem, value of the thought	19	11.5	4	7.8
Pleasure, satisfaction, sense of achievement	11	6.7	17	33.3
Language skills, to give a feeling for language, rhythm, sound	11	6.7	5	9.8
A memory exercise, mental discipline	9	5.4	6	11.7
To help students write poetry	6	3.6	–	–
Other reasons	14	8.5	3	5.8
Total responses	164	100	51	100

Transcripts of Discussions

1. What's the point of studying poetry?

Rachel: I'm giving you out these cartoons because I'm asking you to do a hard thing, I'm asking you to get into your teacher's head —it doesn't have to be your current teacher —and imagine you asked him or her that question. It's not what you think but what you think he or she would say was the point of studying poetry.

William: I think he'd say it was culture; so much has been round for hundreds of years, and it shouldn't stop now.

Jim: I reckon he does it because he enjoys it. He enjoys poetry. He probably likes teaching it.

Mark: Probably he'd say, 'Because it's going to teach you to express yourself better. To improve your writing, it's gone down.' Then he'll lead off the subject.

Helen: He might think it would help you find out what your emotions are, your personal feelings.

Kay: I think he'd say, 'You have to do it, and I will teach you how to appreciate it, and the exams.'

Terry: I suppose it could be learning a new language.

Tricia: It's a way of expressing your ideas. To learn how to express your ideas.

Rachel: To learn by reading other people's poetry?

Tricia: Yes.

Maurice: Just to learn how to analyse it.

Terry: The point of studying poetry is to find the meaning of the poem, what it means to you.

Chris: She wants us to study it. Poetry is almost like another art form, you study other art forms, so to a certain extent you can indulge in it yourself, and so we study it, to see just how we would do it.

2. What are the really important things about a poem?

Rachel: OK, now say you're reading a poem or the teacher is reading it, and you're going to discuss it in some way after, whatever. What does he draw your attention to? What do you think he thinks are the really important things about the poem?

Kay: The story about it, what it's all about.

Helen: The actual thoughts of the poet.

Melody: What effect the poet is trying to get across.

Rachel: The ideas?

Melody: Yes.

Jim: What the structure of the poem is; how it's set out and that. So it gives you an idea of what to do if you want to write a poem.

Mark: The mood, and the use of imagery.

William: What the poet's actually trying to say.

Jim: It could also, be, the expression put into the poem. The way he uses English, adjectives, to describe something.

Dave: Our teacher always asks, 'What is the poet trying to achieve?' and 'Do you think he has succeeded?'

Rob: Older teachers stress structure, figures of speech, onomatopoeia and that sort of thing. The younger teachers are always looking for politics, or something about morality.

Keith: There is far too much stress on the underlying meaning. I mean teachers read into a poem some really far out things that you can guarantee the poet never thought of.

Mick: Some teachers just cannot accept that some poems are just written for fun.

3. Student poems —what kinds are preferred?

Rachel: When the teacher asks you to write a poem, what's he looking for? Is he looking for one sort of poem more than another? What sort of a thing does he want?

Jim: I think his personal feelings get mixed up with what he's trying to get you to write.

Mark: They probably enjoy it if it's closer to what they want to see in a poem.

Rachel: I agree with that. Now what would this teacher be looking for in a poem?

Mark: I don't know.

Melody: We don't know. We've only been asked to write about a desk —now what can you look for in a poem like that?

Rachel: You have to write about the subject he gives you?

Mark: He's a strict teacher, if he tells you to write about something, then you write on the subject.

Helen: If you didn't do it on the subject he gave you, he just wouldn't mark it.

Mark: But why should poetry —does poetry follow a straight line down the road, and you can't go either side; or is poetry anything you want, anything you want. Because if it's anything you want, who is the teacher to say this is good, that is bad. You know, you might be writing poetry that's a hundred years ahead of its time. And if someone reads it then, they'll say, 'It's fantastic, it's brilliant.'

Anna: I get very mad when I write a poem for myself and I express myself and someone comes along and says it's wrong. That they don't like it.

Dick: It's for the teacher.

4. What are the reasons for learning a poem?

Rachel: Has anyone been asked to learn a poem at secondary school?

Mark: We've sort of got to learn part of a poem in case it comes up in a test.

Rachel: All right, so you've answered that question really.

Kay: Yes, our teacher said it would be a good idea to learn a poem in case it comes up in School Certificate, it could be quite helpful.

Mark: We've not had a teacher yet who has said, 'Learn a poem because you'll appreciate it later.'

Helen: He likes it. The teacher might like it.

Kay: We might understand it more. It teaches you more about poetry.

Jenny: He had to learn it, so we have to learn it too.

Kerry: We used to have one every week; off by heart, not all of it, you had a few lines. We had Miss M. We had to learn a couple of verses and you had to either recite it to her or write it down. And if you got it wrong, even a bit wrong, you had to go back after school and learn it till you got it right. It was good. Basically I think it was —just to learn poetry, help our memories, we would remember it, and it was interesting, something to do. We used to have to do a poem review in the exams and that, but every week we had a different poem. It made it interesting. It varied our curriculum.

Andrew: To see how you read it and express it properly, 'cause when you're reading it from a book you're concentrating on reading the words, not concentrating on expression.

Ben: Just how he's saying it. I think, that you have to learn it, because learning it's boring, it's hard to do sometimes, especially if you get told a specific poem to learn.

Rachel: You'd rather learn your own one, one you choose.

Ben: Yes, yes.

John: Write your own one and learn it.

Steven: I reckon we learn to understand what it's about. You read it once, and you can't understand it properly. But I reckon to learn it you've got to read it many times and if you read it too many, you lose the meaning, if you over do it.

Ben: It's stuck in your head but you don't want to remember it so you let it go.

Rachel: So it's kind of self defeating.

Illustration by Jim Gorman